Reading in the dark; Review of: H. Flower (ed), The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic (Cambridge: CUP, 2004)

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Contributors: Jean-Jacques Aubert, T. Corey Brennan, Phyllis Culham, Elaine Fantham, Harriet I. Flower, Erich S. Gruen, Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, Ann L. Kuttner, John F. Lazenby, Kathryn Lomas, Stephen P. Oakley, David Potter, Jörg Rüpke, Mortimer N.S. Sellers, Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg

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'Reading in the Dark'

What are the right ingredients for a good Companion? And what recipe should one use to turn these into a concoction that may promise many happy returns? The answer may not be straightforward; after all, people's tastes are quite different -- some like it hot, others prefer it distinctly exotic, others again like to indulge in the sparse, but often colourful art-work of Nouvelle Cuisine. What H.I. Flower as editor presents to us in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* is none of the above; instead it evokes the distinctly greasy air of the good old fry-up -- standard fare at its best.

There are, of course, many ways in which one may wish to review a multi-authored companion to an ancient historical period -- as with our diverse taste buds, some may prefer to give a full and rounded picture of the various individual parts that make up the whole, others may choose to focus on the highlights that are being offered, others again may concentrate on the overall conception, layout and presentation: whichever take one adopts, there is one main feature that needs to be dealt with up-front when looking at the latest contribution to the already rich companion literature on Roman (here: Republican) history: its almost complete failure to provide the reader with anything that would help her or him to think Roman Republican history on their own two feet.

Harriet I. Flower's *Companion to the Roman Republic* is primarily addressed to the beginner in Roman history, offering "an introduction to the Republic that tries not to privilege a particular time period or point of view", but instead providing "a guide to a variety of areas, fields of study, and possible approaches that are currently being explored", with the specific aim "to suggest the richness of the ancient sources and the debates they are currently raising" (10). And in view of the fact that the various contributions do not offer much that is new under the sun, there could hardly be another target audience. But why should the student of Roman history get the cold fry-up from yesterday? And most of all: how do we think the fare

we all enjoy so much should be dished up for the novice if we wish to whet their appetites for more?

Let us start by glancing at the overall presentation then: the book looks manageable, not too much and not too little; it is available in both hard- and paperback, a fact that makes it attractive for the student market, though the overall lack of illustrations in individual contributions make it less so. The table of contents promises a fairly good mix -- ranging from political and military history (Part 1), to a section on Roman society (Part 2), one on Rome's imperial aspirations and realisations (Part 3), one on Roman culture (Part 4), and last, but by no means least, a single-chapter section on the later reception of Roman republican history (Part 5); in other words, it appears that most interests are catered for. A second glance however may cast first doubts on what's on offer here: take the example of Part 3: Rome's Empire, neatly divided into three chapters, equally neatly covering the three standard parts of Rome's imperial story: the conquest of Italy, the Punic Wars, and Rome's appearance in the Greek East. Oddly enough, the Companion sets out not "to reproduce a narrative of the main events, which can be found elsewhere" (10-11); yet, the mere layout of this section promises precisely that. Similarly, we are told in the 'Introduction' that the various contributions "could easily be read in different combinations" since "many themes cut across several chapters and can be pursued in a variety of ways" (10), the table of contents nonetheless leaves one with the distinct aftertaste that one usually gets from a meal that was seasoned after the actual cooking process: full of flavours rather than flavour. Let me take an obvious example: the section on Roman society features a chapter on 'Women in the Roman Republic' -- a fitting place for it one would think; after all, why should we expect to see women featured in the section on 'Rome's Empire', or indeed in the section on 'Political and Military History'? Such absence has been standard for the last century. (And if you do look at women for women's sake, where then is the chapter on 'Men in the Roman Republic'?) A recent reviewer of a study on women in ancient Greece commented that she looks forward to the time when histories of the ancient world incorporate the women's contribution as a matter of course[1] -- this Companion will leave us waiting. Alternatively, take the list of contributors -- which is interesting, for more than one reason. Flower claims in the 'Introduction' to feature contributions by "leading scholars in America, Britain, and Europe, who are at various stages in their careers and who have been educated in different classical traditions" (10). I managed to spot only four European scholars amongst the fifteen contributors, three of whom are not educated in an Anglo-American tradition but received a German *paideia*: they can hardly represent the vastly different academic traditions in Europe. So, having sampled a bit of the décor, arrangements and amuse-bouches, what about some of the individual contributions then?

Let's not start with political and military history here, but jump to Part 2: Roman Society. Four chapters in total, one on family and household matters, one on women, one on economy and law (!), one on religion. I must admit I expected much from Jörg Rüpke's piece that set out "to demonstrate both the internal pluralism and the characteristic lack of clear external borders in Roman religious practices" (179) -- too much. The piece is solid, providing a good overview of many important aspects, but -- and here's the main but -- it presents a distinctly isolated, if not dislocated, approach to Roman religion that does not induce the innocent reader to appreciate the crucially different structure of Roman religion in comparison with our understandings of religion -- despite the appropriate warnings right at the start. In other words, once the first two pages are dealt with, there is not much here that prevents one from applying 'our' modern notion of religion to things Roman. Things do not get much better when we turn to the chapter on women -- as such a welcome arrival, but, as stated above, still

treated as an entity in its own right. Needless to say, the focus is almost entirely on elite women -- and with this on women that are obviously presented in our sources. Thus, Phyllis Culham takes us on a tour from Lucretia to Verginia, via the Vestal Virgins and the Lex Oppia, to women's tutors and to the one who *lanum* (sic!) *fecit* -- epigraphically speaking that is. There is more than one major *faux pas* here -- all based on silent acceptance of generalisations from the secondary sources: so we are told, once more, that "Roman household slaves had immeasurably better lives than did those who labored in the fields, and the great majority of female slaves would have been in the home" (152) -- I wonder how we know that? Plautus, who is the only source referred to in the relevant section, is surely not conclusive on the matter. Furthermore, given that the chapter deals specifically with women in the Republic -- an historical period full of warfare like hardly any other -- statements such as "women were much more visible in public during the war years" don't actually get one very far, leaving aside that one may wish to contend anyhow the notion that women's public presence was encouraged by "the absence of most able-bodied men" (147), as Rosenstein has recently shown.2 Whether we ought to "assume that women who worked in operations like goldsmithing establishments and perfumeries were of freed status at best and had probably been given or sold to a skilled male worker who had originally been a slave himself" (153) depends entirely on how we want to read the evidence -- and what we think the evidence can and can't do: what the evidence for this (and other such statements) consists of, and why one may wish to interpret it accordingly, is, however, not made obvious here. Jean-Jacques Aubert's contribution on economic matters does not gain from the author's repeated apologetic statements regarding the limited space available and the limited scope selected for the presentation of this topic. The angle is entirely legal, and consequently presents a rather odd approach to deal with the task of offering a guide to the economy in Republican Rome. Treaty after treaty, and law after law are briefly discussed here, most of which deal (naturally) more with matters of trade than with the economy as such. There is a total dearth of any kind of introduction to the sources available for the study of the ancient economy, just as there is total disregard of the various approaches taken by scholars currently -- and in the past. In short, in view of its place of publication, the choice of an entirely legal take is, I fear, misplaced, and although Aubert is certainly right in stating that "any account will be of necessity biased and partial" (176), some are clearly more so than others. This leaves us with the chapter on family, house and household by Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp: my clear favourite in this section, if not in the Companion as a whole. A masterly opening sets the scene that allows the students to think for themselves, and to approve or disapprove of the points made in what follows. Hölkeskamp foregrounds without hesitation or worry the ifs, buts and maybes of our sources, and additionally manages to combine this with a brief overview of the major trends in modern research on the subject matter. That the chapter turns more descriptive and less illuminating towards the end is forgivable vis-à-vis the clear effort to illustrate how we derive to the views we hold -- and what pitfalls we may have to face on the way.

Talking about highlights, Mortimer N.S. Sellers needs a special mention. His contribution on the relationship between the Roman Republic and the French and American Revolution respectively is an unusual, but timely addition to the standard range of topics normally featured in this kind of book. Put into a section by himself, Part 5: Epilogue: The Influence of the Roman Republic, Sellers demonstrates exemplary use of primary evidence in what is essentially an interpretative essay -- and thus allows the reader to *understand* his argumentation as well as to enjoy the beautifully presented finished product. Moreover, by asking a question that is an old favourite in undergraduate exams -- "When did the republic end?" -- in order to assess the intellectual debts of modern states that have borrowed from

ancient (Roman) republican governments, Sellers not only readdresses the question of the nature of republican government from a different angle, but simultaneously provides a refreshing and badly needed shift to the undertaking presented in this Companion as a whole: for his contribution makes clear that history in the modern world can be written only through an intersection of times and places and that it needs to persuade in its importance for today: our questions must matter.

Most of the general points underlying critique and praise that have been made on the above four contributions can be found in all other sections too, and there is not much point in going into detail on each single one. At the start, Stephen Oakley's discussion of early republican history promises more than it is able to deliver: a good and succinct overview of the limitations of the literary sources (and only of those) is followed by a concoction of dates and facts that is unlikely to equip the student with the necessary framework to (re)think early republican history by themselves. T. Corey Brennan on 'Power and Process under the Republican Constitution' is more of a narrative than structurally informing, expecting, at the same time, an awful lot of detailed and general knowledge that the average student is unlikely to have. David Potter's piece on the army and the navy beds military studies into the wider field of socio-political developments, but in doing so offers little insight into the sources and source problems for this topic. Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg, not unlike Brennan, starts off from the premise that a good number of dates and facts are already known to the reader -- which, if true, would make reading of this chapter hardly necessary, offering as it does repetition of (long-overhauled) stereotypes that do not encourage one to problematise such difficult and diverse concepts as Romanization, cultural identity, alternative government, or, and more methodologically, the History of Great Men with which this chapter deals at length. Kathryn Lomas' discussion in Part 3 on Italy during the Republic provides a solid account of the history of Italy in this period with due reference to the rich archaeological evidence available (not least in writing a less Romano-centric account). John F. Lazenby, in his chapter on Carthage and Rome, concentrates in contrast on the literary sources for the struggle between these two powers -- and thus also as much on the main battles and great men as on a retelling of immediate causes and happenings in place of a theoretically and structurally inspired approach. Erich S. Gruen, then, supplies us with a persuasive combination of argument, narrative and conceptualisation of a major point in the modern debate, namely the nature of Rome's drive for empire, in his examination of Roman action with, in and towards the Greek world -- although the discussion is somewhat hampered by Gruen's concentration on Roman aggressive expansionism. The chapter on literature by Elaine Fantham supplies the reader with a swift overview of the most prominent genres and writers from Ennius to Cicero, from epic to prose. What this overview lacks, however, is an argument as well as a preparedness to flag difficulties in historical interpretation; consequently, we now know that Cicero's speech for Milo "was composed only to be read" (287) -- oddly enough, Ciceronians, I understand, have more than one view on the matter. Issues of culture and language receive an equally rushed treatment, so much so that Fantham's overall good discussion of the level of literacy and its relevance for determining a possible target audience of literature at the time is tainted by her complete focus on things Roman = Latin, which even allow her to speak of a "national imagination" (275) that was only kept at bay by Pyrrhus and the Carthaginians: Italy in Fantham's imagination is truly Roman throughout. Ann L. Kuttner's piece is reminiscent in approach to that of Brennan and von Ungern-Sternberg in that her "short survey of republican art" (294) would make more sense if one knew a good amount on the subject matter to start with. It covers a range of objects and materials, from depictions on coins, sculptures, friezes, and other works of art to the temples at the Largo Argentina and issues of public space in the forum at Rome -- without once providing much idea of the shape

of the source material as a whole, its problems and potentials. Not surprisingly therefore, and not unlike Fantham in the chapter on literature, Kuttner manages to define republican art as "any and all artwork that the peoples of the developed Republic made and displayed at home and abroad", based on her assertion that "in the defensive and aggressive militarist identity of Rome, as also in its commercial identity, 'non-Roman' Italians took a full and proud part" (320); whether the artist as well as the owner of the Oscan Spartaks-painting in the fauces of the Casa del sacerdos Amandus in Regio I, 7, 7 in Pompeii -- to name but one example of many -- would have thought of their artistic activity and display as 'republican' is rather doubtful to me. The editor's own piece on spectacle at Rome provides a descriptive overview of some central aspects of Roman political culture with specific reference to two main Roman spectacles: the triumph and the funeral. Ironically, despite a sub-section on the function of spectacles at Rome, the piece offers very little indeed that conceptualises and problematises the purpose and aim of spectacles; problems of locations (there are no maps!), target 'audiences', numbers of peoples involved, etc. are left undiscussed as are, once more, the nature and shape of the specific source material.

So, where have we got to at the end of this elaborate feast? Clearly, there is a concentration on the great and beautiful here, and there is a preference for anything Roman. There is also a preference for telling rather than showing. Of course, in order to enjoy a good meal one does not need to know how to cook; but even Louis XIV already knew what it took to make an omelette: the eggs remain virtually unbroken in this attempt, with only a few cracks here and there easily visible. There is, moreover, a distinct craving left behind for some, shall we call them, centrepieces of Republican history -- in terms of topics: slavery, labour or daily life; in terms of evidence: coins, inscriptions, material remains. In short, the pleasure one gets from sampling this oeuvre is not unlike that which one gets from reading in the dark.

Notes:

1. J. Burnett Grossman (BMCR 2004.03.37), review of P. Brulé, *Women of Ancient Greece* (first published in France as *Les Femmes grecques à l'époque classique*, Paris, 2001), translated by A. Nevill. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
2. N.S. Rosenstein, *Rome at War. Farms, Families, and Death in the Middle Republic*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.